

“WHAT EVIDENCE IS THERE TO CONVICT YOU?”

Acts 4:1-22

I suspect you have had the experience of having a stranger approach you to ask if you are saved? How did you respond? I am intrigued by how this question was answered by Rufus Bucher, a well known Brethren evangelist in Pennsylvania of a past generation. One day Brother Bucher is confronted at the train depot by a young stranger who asks, “*Are you saved?*” “*That’s a good question and deserves an answer,*” the evangelist replies. Brother Bucher goes on to suggest to the inquirer, “*I think I might be a bit prejudice in answering on my own behalf. So I suggest you go to Quarryville and ask George Hansell, the hardware merchant if he thinks I am saved. Or you might go to the Mechanic Grove grocer, or one of my neighbors in Unicorn. And while you are at it, you might ask my wife and children.*” Rev. Bucher concludes, “*I’ll be ready to let their answers about whether I am saved stand as my answer.*”

Rufus Bucher’s answer to the inquirer clearly acknowledges that to be saved—to be a Christian or have a relationship with Jesus Christ—finds expression in how we live our lives. This same dynamic is at the heart of the scripture we heard a few moments ago from the fourth chapter of the book of Acts. Before looking at this scripture we need to look at the previous chapter to find some background. In the third chapter of Acts we find the account of two of Jesus’ disciples—specifically Peter and John—going to the temple to pray. As they are entering this place of worship they are approached by a man who has been lame all his life. Every day he has been carried to the temple to beg for money. The two disciples indicate they have no money to give him, but they will give the man what they do have. Peter orders the man to get up and walk. The disciples help the crippled man to stand who discovers that his legs and ankles are strong. He begins to test his legs and finds they will hold him up for the first time in his life. The man shouts with joy. He begins dancing around and enters the temple praising God for his healing.

As you can imagine, this commotion draws a crowd. Seeing the people gathering, Peter cannot pass up an opportunity to preach. This incident occurs in the weeks following Jesus' resurrection which had been a life-changing experience and Peter is eager to share it. Peter tells those entering the temple to worship that the Jesus whom their religious leaders had crucified has been raised by God from the dead and is alive. The authorities do not like the message Peter is preaching, so they arrest Peter and John and put them in jail. Benjamin Boswell, pastor of Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, suggests the book of Acts could be subtitled the "*arrest of the apostles*" or "*the gospel of going to jail.*" (Myers Park Baptist Church website, "*A Bold Witness*," May 27, 2018) Boswell notes that the book of Acts, the story of the early church, records the disciples being arrested on seven different occasions—Peter and John twice, Stephen once and Paul arrested four different times. Each time the apostles are arrested it is because of the words they boldly spoke and the acts they performed. Proclaiming the healing and liberating truth of Jesus Christ was a dangerous activity because it called into question the social, cultural, political, and religious gods of the day. Jesus was killed for doing it and the disciples knew what they were doing was also dangerous, but they boldly did it anyway.

The day after being arrested Peter and John stand before the Jewish Council. This group consisting of teachers, elders and leaders had final authority in religious matters. Bruce Boswell suggests Peter and John were not arrested primarily because they healed a man and proclaimed the gospel, but they were perceived as a threat to the power structure. The power of the Jewish Council was derived from maintaining religious and political control over the people, and Jesus' followers were challenging it. The only question asked of Peter and John at their trial was this, "*By what power and in whose name did you heal this man? How did you do this?*"

There are two bits of evidence in this scripture which are difficult for the Jewish Council to ignore. The first is that a lame man has been healed. The evidence is undeniable. This man is well known to the members of the Jewish Council who had seen him frequently sitting at the gate and begging. No doubt each one of them has been interrupted numerous times as they made their way into the temple by this man's pleas for financial assistance. And now with their own

eyes they can see him standing and walking on those previously crippled legs. The Council is not just dealing with theory about Jesus being raised, but with a real life situation of a man whose disability has been healed. Peter and John have physical evidence of the difference the power of God makes in a person's life.

The other bit of evidence of the power of the risen Christ is for the Council to observe how the disciples have changed. Commentators remind us that it was in this same room in the home of Caiaphas, the high priest, where Peter and John are now being questioned that Jesus had been tried just a few weeks earlier. You remember part of that story is how Peter follows Jesus as far as the courtyard of the home, but out of fear for his own safety he denies knowing Jesus three times. He had remained as inconspicuous as possible and is finally reminded of his failure by the crow of the rooster. Is not it amazing how different Peter is acting at his own trial? Despite being more in jeopardy he is less afraid. It is obvious to the Council that something has happened to Peter in the intervening weeks. Peter who had previously cowered in fear now stands before them boldly. The authorities are impressed with how forthrightly these ordinary men with no formal education are speaking. In fact, they are so full of their subject that they cannot be kept quiet. When the authorities order them to promise to stop preaching the resurrection, the two disciples indicate they cannot refrain from expressing their faith. Peter and John could have retreated from witnessing to their faith because of the dangers involved, but they do not. In fact they become very bold after they are filled with the spirit of the risen Christ. The message of this biblical story is that experiencing the risen presence of Christ makes a difference in our lives which is evident in how we live. Yes, our salvation is noticed by others.

In Philip Yancey's book entitled, Where Is God When It Hurts?, (page 157f) the author recounts the story of Christian Reger. Pastor Reger belonged to the Confessing Church in Germany, a relatively small group of Christians who bravely spoke out against the injustices of their own government. Because of the church's stance against the Nazi regime, Reger and other Confessing Church pastors, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer, were arrested and sent to concentration camps. Pastor Reger was imprisoned from 1941 to 1945 at the notorious Dachau

concentration camp. Interestingly he stayed there after the war with a mission to share with visitors how the power of Christ gives hope to persons in the face of human depravity. In visiting with Christian Reger on the grounds of the concentration camp in Dachau, Philip Yancey learned this believer's story. Initially so overwhelmed by the cruelty of life, Pastor Reger abandoned all hope in a loving God. He felt forsaken by God, believing no good God would allow such evil to exist. Then something life-changing happened in July 1941. Each prisoner was allowed to receive only one letter a month. Reger finally received the first news from his wife. In the fragments of the letter which had been carefully clipped into pieces by a censor, he received news about the family and assurance of her love. At the bottom of the page his wife had printed "*Acts 4*," a reference to the scripture we are considering this morning.

Having smuggled a Bible into the concentration camp, Reger looks up this passage of Peter and John boldly witnessing before the Jewish Council regarding the power of the risen Christ. That afternoon Reger is to undergo an interrogation, the most terrifying experience for prisoners. He expected to be asked to name other Christians in the Confessing Church on the outside. Those he would name would be captured and possibly killed. On the other hand, refusal to cooperate would result in his being beaten with clubs or tortured with electricity. Reger moves to the waiting area outside the interrogation room. He is trembling with fear. The door opens and a fellow minister whom he has never met comes out. Without looking at Reger, the minister walks over to him and slips something into his coat pocket. Seconds later the guards appear and usher Reger into the room. Remarkably, the interrogation goes well. The guards are surprisingly easy and there is no torture.

That evening back in the barracks Reger remembers the odd encounter with the other minister. He reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out a matchbox. He thinks this is a nice gesture because matches are a priceless commodity in the barracks. In opening the small box he does not find matches, but a folded slip of paper. He unfolds the paper and finds neatly printed on it "*Acts 4*," the same biblical passage noted earlier that day in his wife's letter. There is no way either could have known of the other's reference to this specific biblical passage. Reger

takes it to be a message directly from God. Christian Reger is transformed by that experience which anchors his faith. Yes, Reger would witness many atrocities over the next four years at Dachau. God does not rescue him from the camp or relieve his suffering, but Reger has the assurance that the power of a resurrected God is still alive which made the difference. While some turn from God as the result of the difficulties of life—including atrocities in a concentration camp—the living God met Christian Reger in that deplorable place whose presence gave him power to face his everyday challenges. Yes, **the presence of the risen Christ enables us to boldly witness to our faith by how we live.**

J. D. Glick

May 30, 2021